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ABSTRACT

The successful oral reading of poetry requires that oral interpreters conduct phenomenological investigations of the first lines of the poems, not merely to make these lines happen properly but to suggest what has preceded the first line. Individual word meanings in the opening lines of a poem establish "structures of intentionality"--the revelation of persona, setting, mood, tone--that the performer must "match" to get the poem started. Included in these structures are (1) the kind of awareness of audience that is inherent in the poem and its persona; (2) how the reader's (and listener's) intentions are directed by the objects, actions, and other things constituting the poetic persona's consciousness; and (3) the "thetic" position of consciousness in the poem (how the objects, actions, and feelings are revealed in the poem). The overriding point for the oral interpreter to realize is that these structures of consciousness and poetic intention are in place before the performer utters the first line; so the hurdle to overcome in plunging into the first line of a poem is the enormous "spot of indeterminacy" that occurs just before the first line. (The first lines of several poems are used to illustrate how oral interpreters can determine the structures of intentionality upon which their performances depend.) (RL)

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# The Represented Consciousness in the First Line: A Phenomenological Approach to How a Poem Begins

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Wallace Bacon describes the performance of literature as a "matching" process which brings a poem and a reader together in a living experience. As he says,

> What the interpreter does, through the arduous discipline that constitutes the art of interpretation, is to establish some congruence between the inner form of the poem and his own inner self (working backward and forward between the poem and himself), and then to embody the poem--literally giving body to experience--so that through his own outer form (his voice, his countenance, his body) he in a sense becomes the poem. The poem now becomes audible and visible--and if the interpreter succeeds in establishing congruence between the inner form of the poem and his own inner form, if he achieves a coalescence of the two things, the poem will be alive, will have presence, will be an organism.[1]

This statement clearly points to the literary event in terms of its being "experience" and indicates Bacon's essentially phenomenological view of both text and the performance act, for the phenomenologists begin their philosophical investigations with what is experienced. Ian Alexander describes their concern in saying, "Phenomenology proposes for its aim the description of experience or 'phenomena of consciousness.' These 'phenomena' it understands in terms of world-directed intentions or projects of the subject, incorporated in appropriate patterns of behavior, whereby the subject endows the world with specific senses and meanings."[2] A brief look at a couple of fundamental concepts of phenomenology can perhaps shed light on that thing we call a "poem" and on the process that is performance, and the insights derived from these concepts can then

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be specifically applied to the problem of getting into the opening line of a text through performance.

The language structure that is a literary work of art builds an experience that is fundamentally an act of a represented consciousness, a consciousness whose movement is both determined by and traced from the arrangement of the poem's words as they unfold in their particular order. Through the sentences of a literary work of art a whole represented world is constituted, and that world is always given to consciousness from the point of view of the represented consciousness of the "speaker" of those sentences. As Roman Ingarden points out, the "world" in a literary work of art is not identical with the real world in which its author lives and writes; instead it is a created world, formed through linguistic processes. However, the world that is thereby created is treated as if it were real; it is, in effect, apparently real. The sentences in the literary work are, therefore, not assertions (of real states of being), but apparent assertions; the judgments established in the literary work are only quasi-judgments.[3] The assertions are apparent and the judgments quasi because the consciousness which asserts and judges is--as thoroughly as the aspects of world which are "known" in the course of the poem are--created through the language of the literary text. And it is with the acts of this consciousness that the interpreter "matches" his acts of consciousness in the process of performance.

With respect to acts of consciousness, phenomenology provides us a helpful descriptive tool through the concept identified as "intentionality," whereby consciousness is always the consciousness of something and in which that something is before the subject's consciousness "exactly and only such, as the subject is aware of it and has it in view, when he is

experiencing the act in question."[4] (I am conscious of a tree, then, only in terms of the side it presents to my perception, its distance from me, its lateral relation to me, the prospect from which I view it--for instance, as giving shade or as being like the tree whose leaves I raked in childhood autumns or from whose limb I swung in childhood summers). The act of knowing something, the act of intentionality, is a "moving toward" that something. As Sartre, in an article on intentionality, says, "To know is to 'burst toward,' to tear oneself out of the moist gastric intimacy, veering out there beyond oneself, out there near the tree and yet beyond it, for the tree escapes me and repulses me, and I can no more lose myself in the tree than it can dissolve itself in me. I'm beyond it; it's beyond me."[5]

Bacon considers a significant aspect of the intentionality in a poem in his discussion of the concept of "locus," which treats the question of where the speaker in the poem stands to see what he sees or to say what he says.[6] On one fundamental level, locus has to do with the way in which an audience (or audiences) is before the represented consciousness in the poem. If there is a direct relationship between the represented speaker in the poem and the audience of the poem, there is an "open" locus structure, as, for instance, in such first lines as those by Emily Dickinson:

I'll tell you how the sun rose,--

and

I'm nobody! Who are you?

In some cases the open locus--the intentionality in terms of its directedness toward audience--is less obviously marked than in these instances of second person address. Examples of other indications of open locus could include such a self-reference in terms of the speaking act as that

in the opening lines of Anne Sexton's "The Gold Key":

> The speaker in this case
> is a middle-aged witch, me--

or the once-upon-a-time storytelling stance of the opening lines of Reed Whittemore's "Foxy Loxy's Christmas Happiness":

> Just before chicken licken, henny penny,
> turkey lurkey, ducky wucky and goosey
> loosey started out for foxy loxy's house
> on their way to tell the king of the sky's
> declension, . . .

When the relationship between the poem's speaker and its audience is not direct, there is the "closed" locus structure evident in most meditative lyrics or when the speaker of the poem is in a particular dramatic situation (such as in Amy Lowell's familiar "Patterns"). In these closed situations the speaker may be his own audience or he may be speaking to an audience within the poem rather than to the poem's audience in the actual world.

The word structures of a poem reveal not only the audience toward which a persona's consciousness is directed; the words also represent the objects, actions, etc.,--the "objectivities," as Roman Ingarden calls them[7]--that are given to the persona's consciousness. And as there are variations in locus--in terms of the relationship of the persona's consciousness and his audience--there may also be variations in the "thetic" positions of his consciousness, in relation to the objects of his intentionality. David Michael Levin indicates that this "thetic" character of acts of consciousness "reflects the evidence of the object intended by the act: not the 'what' of the object in its evidence but the 'how,' the object's unique mode of givenness (e.g., whether the properties of the object are given in perception, memory, imagination, etc.; whether the properties are given in certainty, dubiety, supposition, etc.; whether they are given clearly,

dimly, in shadow, etc.; and whether and to what extent they are given fully or incompletely."[8]

Immediate perceptual acts of intentionality directed toward aspects of a represented world in a poem are illustrated in the first lines of, for example, Denise Levertov's "A Daughter (II)":

> Heading south, above
> thick golden surf of cloud.

Similar is the perceptual act in the opening lines of James Wright's "Lying in a Hammock at William Duffy's Farm in Pine Island, Minnesota," whose first words indicate spatial positions in the intentional event:

> Over my head, I see the bronze butterfly,
> Asleep on the black trunk,
> Blowing like a leaf in green shadow. . . .

Or the opening line can embody an auditory perceptual act, as in Howard Nemerov's "Learning By Doing";

> They're taking down a tree at the front door,
> The power saw's snarling at some nerves,
> Whining at others. . . .

The immediacy of re-seeing in an act where the consciousness is in a position of memory can be set up by the poet's specific placing of details in the represented world, as, for instance, in the opening lines of James Dickey's "Cherrylog Road":

> Off Highway 106
> At Cherrylog Road I entered
> The '34 Ford without wheels,
> Smothered in kudzu,
> With a seat pulled out to run
> Corn whiskey down from the hills,. . . .

In the poems with a meditative position of intentionality, remembering acts can be constituted through the time words that may be evident in opening lines, as for instance, the verb tense of "Dolor" by Theodore Roethke:

I have known the inexorable sadness of pencils, . . .

Again, words referring to acts of consciousness themselves may achieve a similar effect, as when the "not. . .forget" reveals an act of remembering in Gwendolyn Brooks's "The Mother":

Abortions will not let you forget. . . .

Words whose meanings project time and specific acts of consciousness may combine to show a remembered experience move into an immediate living of a past evert, as in Lisel Mueller's "A Real Toad in a Real Garden":

Each spring
after the big rains
we find a toad at our doorstep,
a small night visitor,
calm and squat, like Buddha.

The close examination of such words in opening lines to discover features of the represented intentionality may bring about the discovery of such a very complex visionary act as set up by James Dickey in "The Scarred Girl," where the persona experiences (1) an <u>imaginative</u> projection toward the future (2) <u>through another character's</u> consciousness:

All glass may yet be whole
She thinks, it may be put together
From the deep inner flashing of her face. . . .

Perhaps these few examples are sufficient to illustrate that individual word meanings in the opening lines establish structures of intentionality and that these structures constitute the acts in the poem that the performer must "match" to get the poem started. Included in these structures are (1) the kind of awareness of audience that is in consciousness, (2) the direction of intentionality as it reaches toward represented "objectivities," and (3) the "thetic" position of consciousness, which concerns <u>how</u> those objectives are given to consciousness. The overriding point to realize is that in the experiencing of the poem in performance, these structures

of consciousness are in place before the first line is uttered. Since all aspects of the experience of the poem and of the life-world it incorporates that are not represented in words are (in Ingarden's terminology) "spots of indeterminacy,"[9] the hurdle to overcome in plunging into the first line of a poem is that enormous spot of indeterminacy that occurs just before the first line. The words of the first line reveal the structure of intentionality from which those words have derived; but in performance that structure is established by and in the interpreter before utterance, so that the words will then derive from his acts of consciousness as he embodies the represented speaker.

Applying these concepts to the half-dozen poems this panel is considering together,[10] one readily sees that in two instances there is a direct second-person address establishing a definite intentionality in the speaking, but in both cases it becomes clear that the addressee is a specific character in the world of the poem itself. In the Williams poem ("The Horse Show"), that "you" is someone "known" by the persona during an extended time ("constantly") that includes the particular past moment of "yesterday." In the cummings poem ("Notice the Convulsed Orange Inch of Moon"), the understood "you" of the opening line is being directed to participate in a perceptual act at a particular moment of time ("this silver minute of evening") within the represented world of the poem, where the "orange inch of moon" exists to be perceived.

In Wendell Berry's "The Peace of Wild Things," the opening word ("When"), whose meaning content deals with temporality, establishes the meditative position of intentionality in which the persona recalls past experiences of the world which fall into a particular category, (those that evoked despair). And in Roethke's "I Knew a Woman," the opening

words establish the persona's awareness of self in its aspect of previous knowing, again establishing the persona's consciousness in a position of memory. The opening line of Gwendolyn Brooks's "A Song in the Front Yard" shows the persona's intentionality directed toward self in a particular spatial position in the poem's represented world through a duration of time that extends up to the moment of the poem's speaking ("I've stayed in the front yard all my life"). A closed situation of memory is thereby suggested at the poem's opening, but the movement to the moment of immediate utterance might bring the intentionality to a directedness toward audience in that communication act. In Berry's "A Music" the intentionality is directed toward self in its aspect of present activity ("I employ..."), and it is apparent that present activity is one of building a poetic language structure. In the remainder of this line and of the sentence (which extends into line 2), the persona's intentionality is directed toward a particular objectivity ("the blind mandolin player") as it is given to consciousness in a particular setting in the represented world ("in the tunnel of the Metro"). In contrast to the Brooks poem, the consciousness here moves from a less closed to a more closed locus. In both cases, however, the examination of the represented consciousnesses brings to our awareness <u>acts</u> of intentionality that provide the structure of action required for the performing of the poems. The phenomenological investigation of the first line of a poem makes it clear for the interpreter that his making the line happen properly depends upon his embodiment of what happens before the line emerges into the experience of performed literature.

## Notes

[1]Wallace A. Bacon, The Art of Interpretation, 3rd ed. (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p. 37.

[2]Ian W. Alexander, "What Is Phenomenology?" Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 1 (Jan. 1970), 3.

[3]Roman Ingarden, "On So-Called Truth in Literature," trans. Adam Czerniawski, in Aesthetics in Twentieth Century Poland, ed. Jean G. Harrell and Alina Wierzbianska (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1973), p. 170.

[4]Aron Gurwitsch, "On the Intentionality of Consciousness," in Phenomenology: The Philosophy of Edmund Husserl and Its Interpretation, ed. Joseph J. Kockelmans (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Co., Inc., 1967), p. 135.

[5]Jean Paul Sartre, "Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea in Husserl's Phenomenology," trans. Joseph P. Fell, Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology, 1 (May 1970), 4.

[6]Bacon, pp. 70-82.

[7]Roman Ingarden, The Literary Work of Art: An Investigation on the Borderlines of Ontology, Logic, and Theory of Literature, trans. George G. Grabowicz (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), pp. 219-220.

[8]David Michael Levin, "Husserl's Notion of Self-Evidence, "in Phenomenology and Philosophical Understanding, ed. Edo Picevic (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 67.

[9]Ingarden, The Literary Work of Art, pp. 246-254.

✱ [10]William Carlos Williams, "The Horse Show"; e. e. cummings, "Notice the Convulsed Orange Inch of Moon"; Wendell Berry, "The Peace of Wild Things"; Theodore Roethke, "I Knew a Woman"; Gwendolyn Brooks, "A Song in the Front Yard"; Wendell Berry, "A Music."

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